

# Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* at Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India: a new species for the Indian subcontinent

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On 13 February 1997 Neil Arnold, Vinod Goswami and others found a bird at Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India that Neil tentatively identified as an Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*. The bird remained in the area until the 23 February, when I saw it along with a group of friends. I was immediately struck by its small size — it was similar to, though noticeably bulkier, shorter-legged and longer-billed than a Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*. Asian Dowitcher would have appeared significantly larger and is more reminiscent of a Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* in both bulk and jizz. Among other differences an Asian Dowitcher would have had dark legs, whereas this bird had dull yellowish-olive legs. Asian Dowitcher also has a particularly heavy-based, often noticeably bulbous-tipped entirely black bill — this bird had a proportionately longer, slimmer bill with a yellowish-olive basal third. Asian Dowitcher has a rather plain whitish underwing and lacks the dark chevrons and barring shown on this bird's axillaries and underwing-coverts. Asian Dowitcher also has a distinctive upperwing pattern, with a panel formed by pale greater coverts, secondaries and inner primaries. The Bharatpur bird had a rather more uniform upperwing with a dark outer wing and a narrow whitish trailing edge to most of the flight feathers. Clearly, it was one of the two Nearctic dowitchers and, as such, a new species for the Indian subcontinent. Hurriedly ensuring that everyone present was watching the bird and that Alan Shaw was filming it, I worked through the features that I could remember for separating winter-plumaged Long-billed *L. scolopaceus* and Short-billed Dowitchers *L. griseus*. After a few minutes observation and discussion and, despite not hearing the bird call, I felt that I could confidently identify it as a Long-billed. A detailed description was taken, but only those features which separated it from Short-billed have been noted here.

I felt that the bird was large for a Nearctic dowitcher and was perhaps too large to be a Short-billed. In particular, its long tibia and very long bill — the latter being approximately 1.75 times the length of the head, were both thought to be outside the range of a normal Short-billed Dowitcher. From most angles, and in a variety of postures, the bird's folded primaries appeared to fall just short of the tip of its tail. Again, this is often cited as a feature of Long-billed Dowitcher — Short-billed has a wing tip that falls equal to, or more typically extends just beyond the tail tip.

A number of plumage features were noted (and captured on Alan Shaw's video footage) that, in combination with the structural ones, confirmed the bird's identification as a Long-billed Dowitcher.

1. It had a uniform, unspotted grey breast and this colour extended down to the lower breast where it was quite sharply demarcated from the white belly.

The flanks were marked with a series of faint, short grey vertical bars. Short-billed Dowitchers tend to be paler and less extensively grey on the breast than this bird, and have fine streaks and spots particularly on the breast sides.

2. Its upperparts were dark brownish-grey, most of the larger feathers having broad paler fringes creating a pattern reminiscent of a winter-plumaged Little Stint *Calidris minuta*. Significantly, however, the bird retained a couple of juvenile upper rear scapulars. These feathers had fairly conspicuous rufous fringes and unmarked, dark brown centres. A first-winter Short-billed Dowitcher would have had wavy internal markings to any retained juvenile scapulars.
3. The bird preened, stretched or flapped its wings a number of times during our observation, giving us the opportunity to see its tail pattern. The tail was barred black and white with the dark bars appearing clearly broader than the intervening pale ones. A typical Short-billed Dowitcher would have had broader white bars or, at best, bars of similar width.

We never heard the bird call but it is worth noting that I learnt later that Robert Jameson had heard it vocalize. Thinking that he was watching an Asian Dowitcher he noted a 'short, sharp note — like a woodpecker'. This fits better with the *kik* or *keek* note of Long-billed than it does with the mellow, *tutu* or *tututu*, like that of Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*, which is the typical call of Short-billed.

Alan Shaw's video turned out extremely well, and he kindly supplied me with half-a-dozen still photographs taken of the bird, as it appeared on his television screen. I showed them to Jon L. Dunn in May 1997. Noting the lack of distinct grey spots on the breast sides, the lack of any internal wavy markings in the retained juvenile scapulars, the very long bill and the rather dark brownish-grey upperparts (Short-billed being paler, greyer and more reminiscent of a winter plumaged Red Knot *Calidris canutus*), Jon was able to confidently identify the bird as a first-winter Long-billed Dowitcher.

Although this was the first record of Long-billed Dowitcher for the Indian subcontinent it was not altogether unexpected. The species breeds in Alaska and north-east Siberia and there have been over 260 records in Europe (Mitchell and Young 1997), 'in excess of 30 records' in Japan (Brazil 1991), at least six records from Hong Kong (Carey 1996), and others from Bali, Brunei and Thailand (Hayman *et al.* 1986), demonstrating that the species is subject to long distance vagrancy.

I would particularly like to thank Neil Arnold and Vinod Goswami for allowing me to write up their find; Alan Shaw for obtaining video footage of the bird and for providing me with a series of photographs and Jon L. Dunn for his knowledgeable comments on them.

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## Some recent records of birds around Islamabad, Pakistan

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This short communication gives details of the most interesting bird observations made during several stays in Islamabad, Pakistan, between 10 December 1995 and 9 March 1996. Coverage of the area was not continuous as we were in Pakistan primarily for the purpose of carrying out surveys of Western Tragopan in Palas, Indus Kohistan. Most effort was concentrated on Rawal Lake and the surrounding agricultural areas, shrubland and woodland. The Margalla Hills were visited on a number of occasions, mainly during the first month of our stay; most attention was given to the Daman-e-koh ravine and the woodland that runs from the base of the ravine to the Faisal Mosque. Brief visits were also made to the Islamabad rubbish dump, and the Margalla Hills ridge, both on 2 February. During most of our stays in Islamabad we were based at the Dreamland Motel, situated close to Rawal dam, and the woodland behind the hotel was also visited regularly.

**FERRUGINOUS POCHARD** *Aythya nyroca* One drake was seen at Rawal Lake on 27 January, and two drakes there on 30 January. Ward (1994) considered this species to be a vagrant to the Islamabad area.

**SMEW** *Mergellus albellus* One female was seen at Rawal Lake on 31 January. Roberts (1991) considered this species to be scarce in Pakistan, and stated that it was an irregular winter visitor. Ward (1994) noted that it was a vagrant to the Islamabad area, with only one or two sightings at Rawal Lake.

**FULVOUS-BREASTED WOODPECKER** *Dendrocopos macei* Recorded regularly from the Margalla Hills, with a maximum count of four on 3 January. One was seen in the woodland along the western edge of Rawal Lake on 14 December. Roberts (1991) considered this species to be rare in Pakistan. Ward (1994) stated that it was a vagrant to the Islamabad area.

**SIND WOODPECKER** *Dendrocopos assimilis* A male was noted in the woodland at the bottom of the Daman-e-koh ravine on 2 January, and two males and a female in the same area on 20 January. Also recorded from Rawal Lake, with a female in the woodland on the northern

edge of the lake on 4 January. Ward (1994) found this species to be a vagrant to the Islamabad area.

**CRESTED KINGFISHER** *Megaceryle lugubris* First recorded at Rawal Lake on 4 January, but thereafter up to three were seen regularly. Singles in the woodland behind the Dreamland Motel on 5 February and on 24 February, may have involved some of the birds from Rawal Lake. Roberts (1991) stated that this species was a rare resident in Pakistan, with only a few records for Rawal Lake (one in 1982, two in 1983, and one in 1987). Ward (1994) considered this species to be a vagrant to the Islamabad area.

**EURASIAN EAGLE OWL** *Bubo bubo* What was probably the same individual was seen on three dates just south of Rawal Lake, on 3, 4 and 5 February. On each occasion the bird was disturbed from its roost under bushes on an open rocky slope. Ward (1994) stated that this species was a vagrant to the Islamabad area.

**BROWN CRAKE** *Amaurornis akool* Singles were recorded regularly from around Rawal Lake. Roberts (1991) found this species to be a rare and localized resident, with one record from Rawal Lake (two or three birds in July-August 1987). Ward (1994) also considered it to be a vagrant to the Islamabad area.

**MEW GULL** *Larus canus* One first-winter bird was seen at Rawal Lake on 22 January, and presumably the same bird was noted again on 24 January. Roberts (1991) considered this species to be a rare vagrant to Pakistan, with only five records (including one at Rawal Lake in the 1986-1987 winter). However, Vittery (1994) provided details of the first record from Pakistan: a bird at Rasul barrage on 27 January 1974, and also mentioned one at Rawal Lake on 17 February 1974. Ward (1994) also considered the species to be a vagrant.

**PALLID HARRIER** *Circus macrourus* A second-year bird flew west along the Margalla Hills ridge on 2 February. Ward (1994) stated that this species was a vagrant to the Islamabad area.